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Media Review: The Lives of Transgender People

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Media Review: The Lives of Transgender People

Beemyn, G., & Rankin, S. (2011). *The lives of transgender people*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 248 pp. ISBN: 0231143060. (\$24.75 paperback).

Reviewed by Susan Marine, Merrimack College

The Lives of Transgender People is in many respects a landmark study of the experiences, challenges, and resiliencies of a remarkably diverse group of people, all of whom “identify their genders in non-binary ways” (p. vii). Beemyn and Rankin offer readers an engaging story of the ways that the nearly 4,000 participants in this study described their path to understanding themselves as trans*, claiming a trans* identity, and becoming known as trans* to others in their lives. The book provides meaningful insight into both the diversity and common threads of these experiences, assisting educators in learning about this emergent and growing population. The data analyzed for this study give voice to the ways that trans* individuals live with, cope with, and resist the various forces of oppression that impact their experience and the ways they proactively enact and affirm their multiple and complex gender identities. Naming the impact of genderism—the “beliefs and practices that privilege stable, binary gender identities and expressions and that subordinate and disparage trans* people” (p. 21)—is also a key objective of this book.

Although the book is useful to anyone wishing to know more about this population, it will be of specific interest to higher education professionals given the expertise of the authors. Rankin and Beemyn bring many years of experience evaluating campus climates and advocating for improvement related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students’ sense of belonging and thriving. The authors’ expertise undoubtedly informed the development of a 41-item survey instrument and interview protocol, reflecting a desire to more deeply and accurately capture the range of trans* experience. The book included analysis of survey questions such as the ages at which respondents first experienced themselves as different from their peers, questioned their gender identity, and identified as transgender; when respondents met and began to connect with other trans* people; the degree, nature, and consequences of their ‘outness’ to others in their life; and the degree to which respondents experience harassment, discrimination, or other forms of prejudice based on their gender identity. Qualitative data from 418 survey respondents provided the authors with additional insight about the nuances of individual lives, allowing them to weave a more complex picture of the realities of the trans* experience.

The book is organized in five chapters: demographics, experiences of trans* identity, the climate for trans* people, developmental milestones of different transgender groups, transgender youth and

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implications for higher education. In Chapter 1, the authors provided a comprehensive overview of the demographics of their sample, including race, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Acknowledging the complexity of the sample, the authors introduced language to more accurately capture the range of identities claimed by respondents, introducing the terminology “female-to-different-gender” (FTDG) and “male-to-different-gender” (MTDG). By crafting the terms in use carefully, the authors demonstrated the political nature of all acts of naming and asserted that “there are no neutral terms related to transgender people, and there are no neutral systems of classification, treatment, or strategies of empowerment” (p. 17).

In Chapter 2, the authors provided a summary of the experiences of respondents, particularly with respect to memories around the process of ‘coming out’ (to themselves and to others). Most reported feelings of gender difference at very young ages. FTDG respondents were able to delay realization of their gender identity differences because being a “tomboy” is culturally sanctioned in this society; MTDG respondents were not as easily able to blend in as children. The saliency of the internet, in terms of enabling access to language and concepts to understand themselves and to connect with others trans* individuals, was named by most respondents, and the range of web-based information and communities made a significant difference in the ability of trans* folk, especially youth, to recognize and explore their identities.

Chapter 3 reported on trans* experiences with psychological climate, defined as “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of people within an organization, institution or culture” (p. 80). Rankin’s previous work in developing the transformational tapestry model served as the backdrop for the survey’s structure, and the literature on campus climate for LGBT communities is thoroughly explored in this chapter. Some 27% of respondents reported experiencing harassment in the last year; Respondents of Color, those who were more “out,” and those who were younger reported the highest proportion of harassment and violence. Some 19% reported workplace harassment or discrimination based on their gender identity. The authors noted that the paucity of laws and policies to enforce adjudication of trans-related hate crimes, and to protect trans* workers’ rights, necessitates continued work to combat these forms of discrimination. While experiences of trans* employment discrimination are quantified and explored in this chapter, the authors did not include data or analysis related to discrimination or harassment experienced in college, nor does the survey instrument or interview protocol specifically ask about collegiate experiences. Given that the researchers acknowledged age specificity as a goal—“the particular age categories were assigned so that we could focus on the experiences of traditionally college aged transgender people” (p. 29)—and the centrality of campus climate studies in the formation of the instrument, the absence of data and analysis about participants’ perceptions of campus climate is a noticeable omission.

Chapter 4 is the most significant contribution in the book, as the authors summarized the various models of trans* identity development, each of which has limitations based on the sample size or gender identity of the individuals on which the theory is based. To address these deficits, the authors’ analysis yielded a series of milestones common to many within particular trans* identities, including repression, exploration, coming to terms with, and embracing their identities. Because many of these developmental milestones typically began in late adolescence and unfolded throughout the person’s lifetime, the authors provided a vivid roadmap for those working with trans* students in higher education. The importance of revelation to others in this process was evident, and the “sense of wholeness” (p. 156) many came to embody is a welcome counter-narrative to the prevailing discourse of a “split” self, of being born into the “wrong body.”

Finally, in Chapter 5, the authors discussed implications for working with trans* youth and college students. In this section, data and narrative voices of participants in college would greatly



enrich the readers' understanding of current student needs and concerns, especially since very little of the literature on the needs of trans* college students is empirically based. The brevity of this chapter belies the significant work of changing policies and practices to be more supportive of trans* students that needs to happen. Greater clarity about how colleges should meet the needs of genderqueer students—beyond offering mixed gender fraternities and intramurals—would also strengthen this chapter. The book concludes on a hopeful note: Instead of feeling trepidation, the authors suggested that educators who wish to be change agents “embrace and celebrate the idea that gender is bound only by the limit of people’s spirits” (p. 166). Compellingly, the voices in this book and the thoughtful analysis applied to the participants’ experiences relay the urgent need for a profession-wide commitment to creating more welcoming environments for people of all genders in college.